STAR FOLLOWERS
January 6, 2008

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Psalm 72:1–7
Isaiah 60:1–6
Matthew 2:1–12

"Arise, shine; for your light has come."
Isaiah 60:1 (NRSV)

Lord God of the nations,
we have seen the star of your glory rising in splendor.
The radiance of your incarnate Word
pierces the night that covers the earth
and signals the dawn of justice and peace.
May his brightness illumine our lives
and beckon all nations to walk as one in your light.
We ask this through Jesus Christ your Word made flesh,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
in the splendor of eternal light,
God forever and ever. Amen.

Prayer of the Day for Epiphany
Book of Common Worship

I am always amazed by how long it takes us to get ready for Christmas and how quickly it is over. We begin months in advance. Signs of Christmas begin to appear in September, and by the time Advent arrives around the first of December, things are in full swing: sidewalks are crowded with Christmas shoppers, the music of Christmas is in the air, Christmas socializing fills calendars, schools go on vacation, office hours shorten, the work day ends earlier to allow us more time to prepare and anticipate and enjoy. And then, sometime during the day of December 25, it collapses like a giant balloon with the air suddenly out.

That is not my favorite part of Christmas, frankly, that sudden collapse. If truth were told, I have avoided the domestic task of dismantling the tree every year. My record is unblemished. I'm much better at anticipating. I explain that it's not time yet, that there are twelve days of Christmas, so my absence is for religious reasons.

Each year I recall W. H. Auden's wry observation in his "Christmas Oratorio," "For the Time Being":

> Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
> Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes—
> The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
> And the children got ready for school. There are enough
> Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week—
> Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
> Stayed up so late, attempted—quite unsuccessfully—
> To love all of our relatives, and in general
> Grossly overestimated our powers.

Recently I discovered something lovely Peter Gomes wrote about it, about this Sunday, twelve days after Christmas: "It is very difficult to tear ourselves away from Bethlehem," he wrote.

> There is a time to lay down one's cares and duties and run to Bethlehem and the manger , a time to follow the star . . . a time to flee for refuge from the troubles of the world. There is also a time to return, to begin where we left off . . . for we have come from an encounter with the world of the possible in the midst of the impossible. We have seen God and survived to tell the tale, moving about not knowing that our faces shine with the encounter, bearing the mark of the encounter forever and marveling in the darkest night of the soul at that wondrous star-filled night. (*Sermons*)

One of my favorite moments, and favorite Christmas memories, is that time on Christmas Eve, at the end of the candlelight service, when each person in the sanctuary, which is quite full, lights a small candle and then passes the light on down the pew to his or her neighbor. The darkened sanctuary fills with the most beautiful light, and up here in the chancel I can see something that most of you can't. Each face is shining. The face of every man, woman, child is suddenly illuminated—it literally shines—and it is such a picture, a sanctuary full of beautiful shining faces.

The Bible says that's what happens when people encounter God: their faces shine. When Moses met God on Mount Sinai and came back down, he frightened everyone because his face was shining. He didn't even know it, but his encounter with God made his face shine.

"Rise, shine, your light has come," the prophet Isaiah wrote. The people were in exile, under house arrest essentially, in Babylon, miles from home. They had been there for a generation. It looked like they would never go home. It was a time of deep and thick darkness. "Rise, shine," the prophet writes to them. "God is about to do a new thing. Your circumstances are

about to change, and your fortunes are about to dramatically improve. There's light now in the darkness. But you can't just continue to sit there moping, feeling sorry for yourself. It's time to stand up, get ready to move; time to take charge of your life again. You are no longer helpless victims. There is light in your darkness, and it's time for you to shine."

That is the message of Epiphany, the time after Christmas, the time for faces to shine because we have seen a star. It is the day of the first star followers, the magi.

They were priestly astrologers from the East—Persia (modern Iran), Babylon (Iraq), Arabia (Saudi Arabia). We call them wise men and sometimes kings. They were actually scholars. They studied the stars, and when they saw something new in the heavens, they tracked it down to see what it meant. They believed that important events were always announced by the stars. They were not kings, but kings did consult with them because of their mystical knowledge. And we don't know how many there were. They brought three gifts, suitable for royalty, but there may have been two or twenty. They traveled a long way from their homes following a star. Adler Planetarium will tell you that it might have been a supernova or the convergence of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars, which occurred about that time and would have looked very much like a new star.

The magi concluded that the new star was the sign of the birth of a new king in the West, which meant Judah. So they headed for the royal palace in Jerusalem, where they fully expected to find a new prince, a new heir to the throne, and they planned to present the gifts they had brought for the occasion, expensive royal gifts, suitable for the infant prince.

To their dismay, however, there is no baby in the palace. The current king, Herod, has children but no infants, and he takes great interest in what the magi tell him about the star and the new king—his heir and replacement—that he knows nothing about. Herod is very interested for obvious reasons, consults with his own scholars, asks them that just in case there was a new king, where would he be born. The scholars know what the Bible says about that, pull out the scroll of the prophet Micah, and read the passage to Herod that says that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. So Herod sends them off, down the nine-mile road to Bethlehem, to check it out and makes a modest request: "Tell me if you find him; I will come and worship him, too."

The magi find him with Mary and Joseph and they do what they planned to do. They fall down and worship him and give him the elaborate gifts and leave with joy in their hearts. They do not return to Jerusalem, however. They had been warned in a dream. Herod, known not only for his impressive administrative and political skill but also for his murderous rage and violent cruelty, surely is not going to worship the child. So they return to their

home by a different route. Herod, later, will move on his paranoia and order his troops to ride to Bethlehem and kill every infant under two years of age. By the time that happens, Mary and Joseph and the child are on their way to Egypt.

There are several important things about that story that are a word for us this morning. The first is that these are outsiders, non-Jews in a Jewish story. These are Gentiles, pagans, not part of the chosen people, here at the very beginning: Arabs at the manger. Matthew introduces Jesus Christ by way of a story that shatters religious tradition and brings strangers, outsiders, the other, into the spotlight. It is here at the beginning, and before this story is over, Jesus will shatter all the old boundaries of religion and race and social class and status and gender. Before this story is over all the outsiders—the marginal, the sinners, the unclean, lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes, poor people, women, children, foreigners, Roman centurions, all of them outsiders—will be part of the story, will be welcomed and included in his company, welcome at his table. Before it is over, Jesus will scandalize the most pious, orthodox, religious leaders of his people by his radical inclusivity. He doesn't know an outsider apparently, doesn't understand that one of the anthropological functions of religion is to define the tribe, draw lines between us and them and then to build separation walls of doctrine and practice to keep us away from them, keep them out, doesn't understand that way of thinking at all, tears down the walls, crosses the boundaries, flings the doors wide open,; and welcomes everyone home. And it begins here, at his manger.

And so in a time when churches, wonderful old denominations—Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist—find themselves almost coming apart over the issues of boundaries and who is acceptable and who is not, who is welcome, who is fit to lead and be ordained, wouldn't it be something if the spirit of the first story in the New Testament—outsiders at the manger, the spirit of the man who was far more concerned about who is included rather than who is excluded—would suddenly, graciously, begin to be evident? Wouldn't it be something if his church, his followers, were known for whom they reached out to and embraced and welcomed home rather than whom they have kept out? Wouldn't it be a miracle to wake up some morning and read in the paper not yet another report of schism, division, but that the church was going to do what Jesus did?

And the second important thing about this story is that when they saw the child, everything changed for them. They were transformed. They had to alter their plans, go home by a different road. They were "overwhelmed with joy," Matthew says, "when they saw that the star had stopped over the place where the child was." I like to think that their faces were shining, those wise, old astrologers who knew so much and who thought they had

seen everything there was to see. I like to think that because they had decided to follow the star, their faces shined.

Why do you suppose they did it in the first place, packed up and started on a journey not knowing how or where it would end, with only the light of a star to lead them? Was it because they were bored with the status quo, impatient with the way things were in the world? Did they follow the star because they were people of relentless hope who were always hungry for, watching for, striving for a world better than this one, a world as God intends it to be, a world where justice and kindness and compassion are operative realities instead of ruthless power, prejudice, hatred, and cruelty?

Star followers are people of relentless hope. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann wrote an important book, *The Theology of Hope*, in which he said, "The other side of pride is hopelessness, resignation, inertia, melancholy. Temptation consists not so much of the titanic desire to be as God, but in weakness, timidity, weariness, not wanting to be what God requires of us" (p.22).

Star followers are people of hope who do not give in to the temptation of resignation. They are people whose faces shine with hope.

The motion picture *The Great Debaters* is a wonderful story of Wiley College and its debate team. Wiley College is a small, Methodist, African American college in Texas. In 1935 its debate team experiences extraordinary and unlikely success, under the leadership and inspiration of Professor Melvin Tolson, played by Denzel Washington. It is a time of deep and profound racism, a time when the threat of violence and lynching is everywhere, always just beneath the surface. Tolson inspires his students to stand up, believe in themselves, to reclaim and discipline their minds, which slavery and racism have tried to take from them. It is a wonderful story of star followers.

Benazir Bhutto must have been a star follower. Her assassination just two days after Christmas was a reminder that the world can be a very dark place indeed, that the forces of hatred and religious fanaticism and sexism and fear are still very much around. "Why wasn't she more cautious?" Clarence Page asked in an editorial last Sunday. "She knew the odds, yet fear was a luxury she refused to afford." She challenged "ruthless dictators, religious fanatics, military conspirators, intelligence agents and male supremacists." She reminded Clarence Page of another star follower, Martin Luther King Jr., who, on the night before his assassination, said that he had seen the promised land. "I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land" (*Chicago Tribune*, 30 December 2007).

Star followers do amazing things. A few examples close at hand: star followers leave their home and family in Africa, come to America alone, get an education, become a pharmacist, and then start an AIDS clinic in Cameroon. Star followers join the Peace Corps and give several primetime years to digging wells and providing sanitation for a rural village in East Asia. Star followers decide to choose service careers. Star followers I know left a lucrative law practice and spent several years in Albania administering church and government aid programs. Star followers I know graduated from med school, got married, and volunteered to begin their practice in a small village in Malawi. Another star follower left a corporate law practice to become head of a national church structure with mission and service programs all over the world. A star follower I know dropped out of college and is working in New Orleans for Habitat for Humanity.

That's what a church is, a community of star followers. Now not everyone can drop what they're doing and move to Africa or Albania or New Orleans. But all of us—each of us—can be people of relentless hope who never give up, who continue to pray for and work for and sacrifice for the day of the Lord. We can be people who are filled with joy because we have seen the child; people who love and take care of their dear ones, go to work and take care of business; people who live their lives intentionally, doing everything they can faithfully to follow and to bring honor to their Lord; people whose shining faces reflect the starlight of Bethlehem, the light that shines in the darkness, the light of Jesus Christ.

Amen.